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# The Ladakh Crisis and the Opportunity for US-India Relations—with A Catch<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*The recent India-China border crisis in Ladakh underscores the threat posed by Beijing to United States (US) and Indian interests in the Indo-Pacific region. Accordingly, the spat presents opportunities to strengthen US-India partnership. However, the crisis also risks exposing the partnership's limits. This paper argues that to fully capitalise on the opportunities that the crisis generates for US-India relations, Washington and New Delhi should make some definitional and operational calibrations to their relationship. Additionally, America should expand its geographic conception of "Indo Pacific" beyond sea-based theatres and into land-based spaces, including the Line of Actual Control (LAC). This wider purview would strengthen US-India relations and serve US interests more broadly by expanding the scope for cooperation with Indo-Pacific states within the ambit of America's Asia policy.*

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## **Introduction**

There is so much that's not known about the India-China crisis in Ladakh, even many months after it began. There are no clear answers to some very fundamental questions: Why did this crisis happen, and why did it happen when it did? However, what is known is that the horrific events of 15 June 2020 plunged India-China relations to their lowest point in decades. From the perspective of Washington, where support for deeper partnership with New Delhi is strong, sustained and wholly bipartisan, there is a clear strategic takeaway: The crisis provides a major opportunity for the US-India relationship. However, for Washington and New Delhi to fully capitalise on this opportunity and achieve real forward movement towards true strategic partnership, some tough policy steps would be required to be taken by both sides.

## **Deconstructing the Drivers of a Dangerous Dispute**

The causes of the Ladakh crisis, to the extent that we can identify them with confidence, go well beyond local factors—such as infrastructure building along the LAC. This is not to minimise the significance of these road projects, but there was clearly much more at play.

Road building along the LAC is not new. It has sparked many India-China border spats in the past; including most recently, the Doklam stand-off in 2017—which was triggered by China's decision to extend a border road. And yet, border spats in the past triggered by road building (including the most recent previous one, back in 2017 on the Doklam Plateau) have not been nearly as long, tense, violent and deadly as the Ladakh crisis. That is because road building was not likely the only trigger for the latest border spat. There are four other more powerful—and more global—drivers likely at play. Each of them, in their own way, demonstrates how the dynamics of the current crisis accentuates the opportunities for strengthening US-India partnership.

First, over the last few years, Beijing has adapted an increasingly muscular foreign policy meant to better pursue its interests overseas, including asserting its territorial claims. Beijing itself has given this new muscular policy a name—“wolf warrior diplomacy.”<sup>2</sup> This policy has manifested itself through provocations in the South China Sea, increasingly bellicose language addressed at Taiwan, and a new national security law in Hong Kong—all of which happen to be deeply concerning to Washington and its treaty allies and partners in Asia. It is within this broader context that we should view China’s unusually robust provocations—multiple incursions in many areas along the LAC—in Ladakh.

Second, a key geopolitical driver of the current spat is the US-India-China relationship. The US-China relationship is arguably about as tense as a relationship can be without being in a hot war. By contrast, the US-India relationship is on the ascent.<sup>3</sup> It’s been growing rapidly since the early 1990s, and especially, the early 2000s, but it’s enjoyed a rapid growth mainly under the presidency of Donald Trump. As noted, it is one of the few key US’ bilateral partnerships that hasn’t suffered in the Trump era. Rising concern about China’s activities in Asia is a major reason why the Trump administration’s signature Asia policy, its Indo Pacific strategy, is all about counter-balancing China; wherein, it envisions India playing a key role in that endeavour.<sup>4</sup> So, looking at the Ladakh crisis, Beijing’s moves can be seen as an effort to deliver a tough message to both Washington and New Delhi: *If you two are going to band together against us, then be ready to get pushed back.*

The third factor is the coronavirus pandemic. Beijing has suffered a major blow in the court of global public opinion, with many key capitals—including New Delhi but especially Washington—issuing harsh criticism of Beijing for its poor initial handling of COVID-19. This criticism argues that China’s lackadaisical initial response enabled the virus to rapidly spread beyond China’s borders and in due course to become a deadly

pandemic. Beijing, finding itself on the defensive, has harboured a need to go on the offensive to telegraph defiance, toughness and strength. This likely helps explain why China acted boldly in Ladakh.

A fourth key geopolitical factor that can help explain Chinese provocations in Ladakh is India's repeal of Article 370 and 35A of its Constitution in August 2019.<sup>5</sup> Beijing's foreign ministry immediately rejected the move in a strongly worded statement. It also responded unhappily after New Delhi published, in November 2019, new maps reflecting changes in India's cartography that included the reorganisation of Ladakh as a Union Territory, following the abrogation of Article 370 and 35A.

While in late June 2020, two months after the Ladakh crisis began, the Indian journalist Sushant Singh published a report revealing that Indian and Chinese forces had actually experienced a clash along the LAC back on 11 September 2019. That tussle, which injured 10 Indian soldiers, took place just weeks after India repealed Article 370—thereby, suggesting a desire by Beijing to send a tough message to New Delhi about India's actions the previous month.<sup>6</sup>

Significantly, while some voices in Washington—particularly on Capitol Hill—publicly criticised the draconian effects of the Article 370 repeal, such as the detention of politicians in Kashmir and a communications blackout there, the Trump administration did not express any public opposition to India's move. This fact would not have gone unnoticed in Beijing.<sup>7</sup>

These likely drivers of the Ladakh crisis underscore how a complex India-China relationship—one buoyed in recent years by a robust trade partnership and relatively cordial diplomatic ties, but constrained by growing strategic competition and security tensions—has become increasingly fraught. This very aspect highlights the convergences between Washington and New Delhi.

## Reviewing the Ramifications

The geopolitical consequences of the crisis underscore both a dangerously tense India-China relationship, and the possibilities for scaled-up US-India partnership—but only if each side is willing to take some ambitious steps.

First, the Ladakh crisis amplifies China's rapidly deepening footprints in South Asia. The main accelerant of Beijing's growing regional reach is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). There are four South Asia-focused envisioned aspects of BRI: The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM) (which India has not surprisingly rejected), a Trans-Himalayan Corridor involving Nepal, and a Maritime Silk Road initiative enveloping Bangladesh, Maldives and Sri Lanka. In view of this, the Ladakh crisis shows how Beijing does not only use the carrot of BRI to build out its presence in the region, but also the stick of military provocations. First, there was Doklam, now there is Ladakh. This is problematic for New Delhi as well as Washington. To argue so, as interests of the US are not served by Washington's top strategic rival deepening its influence and presence of one of its top regional partners in the backyard.

Another core implication of the crisis gets to the heart of the matter. The US-India relations stand to further improve—but with a potential catch.

The Trump administration has viewed India as a key partner in US efforts to build out its Indo-Pacific strategy, because it has seen India as an emerging power—both economic and military and with the capacity to work with the US to counter-balance Beijing. The administration has also recognised that India and the US are united in their intensifying concern about China's growing power, and the threat it poses to Indian and US interests.

Significantly, such views enjoy bipartisan support in Washington—however, they do not only reflect the Trump administration's thinking.

Indeed, in a January 2020 *Foreign Affairs* essay laying out his foreign policy vision; Joe Biden, a strong proponent of US-India partnership, wrote for the need to “get tough with China.” He elaborated as follows:

“China represents a special challenge. I have spent many hours with its leaders, and I understand what we are up against. China is playing the long game by extending its global reach ... We need to fortify our collective capabilities with democratic friends beyond North America and Europe by ... deepening partnerships from India to Indonesia to advance shared values in a region that will determine the United States’ future.”<sup>8</sup>

Beijing’s wolf warrior diplomacy is problematic for US Republicans and Democrats alike. This is not just because it entails America’s top rival throwing its weight around more aggressively on the world stage, but also because it poses direct threats to the interests of the key US partners like India, treaty allies in East Asia, and friends in Taiwan and Hong Kong—and by extension US interests.

In effect, the Ladakh crisis, for Washington, underscores the harm that China can inflict on India.

It’s notable that Washington took on an unusually public role in the Ladakh crisis. Usually when there are India-China border standoffs, the US stays mum publicly while privately offering intelligence support to India. But in this case, several senior US leaders—Alice Wells, until recently the top South Asia official at the State Department; Elliot Engel, the chair of the House International Relations Committee; Mark Meadows, President Trump’s chief of staff; and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo—have all been critical of China for its moves in Ladakh. Washington’s more public response this time around is not only a function of a hostile US-China relationship, but is also an indication of its concern about its strategic partner India getting embroiled in a dispute with China.

The India-China border dispute stands to strengthen the US-India relationship because it crystallises their mutual concern about the dangers of China's growing power—the main geopolitical pillar undergirding US-India partnership. Additionally, with India-China tensions at a fever pitch, and with New Delhi's longstanding hesitation to antagonise China melting away, New Delhi could be prompted to move closer to the United States and pursue deeper security collaborations with Washington.

But here is the catch. For all the talk of its potential benefits for US-India ties, the India-China crisis actually risks exposing the *limits* of US-India partnership. There are two reasons for this.

First, the crisis has exposed the constraints that India confronts in pushing back against China—the very role Washington envisions New Delhi playing, in cooperation with America and other partners, as part of the Indo-Pacific strategy. India was provoked by China, with Beijing staging incursions on multiple points along the LAC, and yet—short of fighting back hard against Chinese soldiers on 15 June—India did not engage in any military retaliation, in large measure because it lacks the capacity to do so against its more powerful rival. New Delhi has engaged in economic retaliations against Beijing, including banning 59 Chinese apps, but such moves have not impacted China's force posture along the LAC. Indeed, Chinese forces continued to be hunkered down on territory that India considers its own long after the incursions were originally staged. This relative Indian inaction is particularly striking given that some experts in recent months have argued that while China may be the more powerful country, Indian forces actually may enjoy some tactical advantages vis-à-vis the Chinese military along the LAC.<sup>9</sup>

To be sure, India has gone on the offensive at times during the crisis. At the end of August; for example, Indian forces reportedly captured a Chinese military post after Chinese soldiers tried to occupy more territory that India claims as its own. However, while this manoeuvre may have given India a bargaining chip for its negotiations with China, the move—

much like India's economic retaliations against Beijing—likely did not have an impact on China's troop posture.

The second reason why the India-China spat risks accentuating the limits of US-India relations is this: If India moves closer to the US, there will be greater American expectations of India to agree to joint patrols and other operational cooperation with the US that New Delhi has long resisted. If India continues to resist this type of operational collaboration—the type of cooperation that Washington expects of its close allies—then that could impact US-India relations. After all, if India becomes a virtual ally of the US yet still refuses to engage in alliance-type behaviour, then when would it ever agree to do so?

### **Policy Recommendations**

First, India and America should be encouraged, but also be cautious about the opportunity for stronger relations afforded by the India-China spat. Expectations should be carefully calibrated. The two sides should explore ways to transform the relationship into a truly strategic one—a partnership that goes beyond arms sales, intelligence-sharing, technology transfers, and other largely transactional measures that have characterised deepening bilateral security ties. Thanks to India's sinking relationship with China, there may be more political will in New Delhi to do so now than at any time previously—and not just because the fear of antagonising Beijing is not as great. The current crisis raises the possibility, albeit remote, of a future Indian conflict with China. There is little chance that America would intervene on India's behalf—beyond intelligence sharing and other modest tactical support—in a hypothetical India-China conflict. However, the likelihood may increase if Washington viewed New Delhi as a true strategic partner, in the way that it does treaty allies such as Japan and South Korea. And this would entail some big-ticket additions to the relationship—including a series of security guarantees and other accords that go well beyond the foundational agreements that bolster the US-India military partnership today.



This is not to suggest that New Delhi would seek US intervention in the event of an Indian conflict with China. In reality, India likely would be content with modest tactical US support. However, a repurposed US-India security relationship—one with security guarantees and other new features—would be essential if, in the event of a particularly serious and drawn out India-China conflict, the Indian side were to change its position and desire more robust US support.

If the US-India relationship is to undergo such a transformation, it will take ample time to consummate. It would then need to be carefully negotiated through a structured and sustained dialogue—a concept in which the Trump administration took little interest.

The bottom line is that as America and India continue to grow out their security relationship, they will need to contemplate how to craft this partnership so that it addresses both Washington's preference for more operational cooperation and New Delhi's reluctance to engage in alliance-like behaviour. New developments as the year 2020 drew to a close—including movement toward finalising the last of the foundational agreements between the two sides, and momentum towards revitalising the QUAD grouping comprising America, India, Australia and Japan—highlight some of the future contours of the US-India security relationship. However, such developments represent only a start.

Second, the seriousness of the current border crisis—and the likelihood that the deadly clash of 15 June could mean more violence in future stand-offs between the two nuclear-armed rivals—illustrates how the LAC is a new flashpoint in Asia. However, US policymakers have traditionally viewed the Indo-Pacific through a sea-based lens—and not surprisingly, American maritime cooperation with littoral states constitutes a core pillar of cooperation within the Indo-Pacific policy.<sup>10</sup>

And yet, if Washington wants the Indo-Pacific policy to focus on counter-balancing Chinese power, it would need to expand the geographic purview beyond the South China Sea, the Senkaku Islands, and other

sea-based theatres for Chinese power projection and provocations, and situate it in land-based spaces such as the LAC as well. This broader geographic scope would strengthen US-India relations, and it would also serve US interests more broadly by expanding the scope for cooperation with Indo-Pacific states within the ambit of America's core Asia policy.

## Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was prepared as part of a joint research collaboration between the Wilson Center and CLAWS. It was published on the website of both organisations. See "The Ladakh Crisis and The Opportunity for U.S.-India Relations—with A Catch," Wilson Center, August 7, 2020. Available online at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/ladakh-crisis-and-opportunity-us-india-relations-catch> and <https://www.claws.in/the-ladakh-crisis-and-the-opportunity-for-us-india-relations-with-a-catch/>, accessed on September 5, 2020.
2. Ben Westcott and Stephen Jiang (2020), "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy: China Is Embracing a New Brand of Foreign Policy," CNN.com, May 29, 2020. Available online at <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/28/asia/china-wolf-warrior-diplomacy-intl-hnk/index.html>, accessed on September 5, 2020.
3. For recent appraisals of the US-India relationship, see Michael Kugelman (2020), "Post-Trump's India Visit, the US-India Partnership is in a Good Place," Asan Forum, April 6, 2020. Available online at <http://www.theasanforum.org/post-trumps-india-visit-the-us-india-partnership-is-in-a-good-place/> and Jeff Smith (2020), "Rising Above the Fray: The Trump-Modi Chapter in India-US Relations," The Heritage Foundation, February 19, 2020. Available online at <https://www.heritage.org/asia/commentary/rising-above-the-fray-the-trump-modi-chapter-india-us-relations>, accessed on September 8, 2020.
4. For a recent official articulation of this policy, see "A Free and Open Indo Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision," U.S. Department of State, November 4, 2019. Available online at <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Free-and-Open-Indo-Pacific-4Nov2019.pdf>, accessed on September 8, 2020.
5. Ashley Tellis, a strategic analyst of South Asia, has concluded, based on his conversations with Chinese officials, that the Article 370 revocation was indeed a key motivating factor. See "Ashley J. Tellis on India's China Conundrum," The Grand Tamasha Podcast, Carnegie Endowment/*Hindustan Times*, September 22, 2020. Available online at <https://grandtamasha.simplecast.com/episodes/ashley-j-tellis-on-indias-china-conundrum>, accessed on September 25, 2020.
6. Sushant Singh (2020), "First Signs of Trouble in Pangong was Last September, Days After Ladkah Became UT," *Indian Express*, June 28, 2020. Available online at <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-china-lac-first-signs-of-trouble-in-pangong-was-last-september-days-after-ladakh-became-ut-6479516/>, accessed on September 20, 2020.

7. For a useful assessment of Beijing’s thinking in the context of the Ladakh crisis, see Yun Sun (2020), “China’s Strategic Assessment of the Ladakh Crisis,” June 19, 2020. Available online at <https://warontherocks.com/2020/06/chinas-strategic-assessment-of-the-ladakh-clash/>, accessed on September 15, 2020.
8. Joseph R. Biden, Jr. (2020), “Why America Must Lead Again,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 23, 2020. Available online at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>, accessed on September 20, 2020.
9. See Frank O’Donnell and Alexander Bollfrass (2020), “The Strategic Postures of China and India: A Visual Guide,” Belfer Center, Harvard Kennedy School, March 2020. Available online at <https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/india-china-postures/China%20India%20Postures.pdf>, accessed on September 25, 2020.
10. See “Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region”, U.S. Department of Defense, June 1, 2019. Available online at <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>, accessed on September 25, 2020.

